The Pandemic is Teaching People One Important Lesson: Grow Your Own Food

The fear of food shortages is driving many to follow what urban farmers have been doing for years: growing their own groceries.

by Pallavi Pundir
22 April 2020, 7:51am

Photo: Benjamin Combs/Unsplash

A few days ago, under the ongoing lockdown to contain the spread of coronavirus in India, Diipti Jhangiani—a resident of Bandra in Mumbai, India—was walking through a 50-square-metre patch of land inside her building complex. In it were robust hedges of tomatoes, carrots, okra, spinach, papayas, chikoos, drumsticks, bitter gourd and other vegetables. She dug up some fresh turmeric to take back home. "During a crisis like [this pandemic], there will always be a shortage of food for those who can't afford it," says the 34-year-old urban farmer and the founder of an agricultural startup called Edible Gardens. "And even for those who can, there are some shortages. We've run out of haldi (turmeric) in the stores nearby. But I've been growing haldi in my community farm in my society, so we're using that instead. And it's so much fresher."

A few years ago, when Jhangiani started converting barren public spaces to community gardens—like the one she created in her building complex three years ago—she mostly heard people calling it a "silly gardening hobby". "Right now though, I have to say, it's very gratifying to see that people are talking about growing your own food and managing your own waste. There are elderly people who come to take bitter gourd from the farm, which is excellent for purifying blood," she tells VICE. "The real interest in urban farming will only show once the lockdown is over. It will show if people really mean to change. But it's good to have started this conversation, finally."

Across the world, the pandemic has brought to our notice many fallouts—from the failing public health systems to our fragile mental health to the economic slowdown to the glaring rich-poor divide. But there's another aspect that is slowly bringing the world to its knees: the fear of food shortage. In every country where lockdowns have been imposed in order for the people to maintain social distancing to contain the spread of the virus, there have been reports of panic buying and hoarding in literally every country possible. While many faced empty shelves at supermarkets and stores, others found a huge segment of their population not able to feed itself. And this is despite the fact that some reports say there is really no major concern for global food security yet.

The perception of food shortage and fears of inflated prices, along with disruptions in food supply chains subsequently point to the fact that there is a high possibility that we're on the verge of, or are heading steadily towards a breakdown. This trend even led global agencies such as the World Health Organization (WHO) and the United Nations (UN) to predict massive food shortages across the globe. "Uncertainty about food availability can spark a wave of export restrictions, creating a shortage on the global market," said a joint statement by UN's Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), WHO and World Trade Organization.

In fact, developing countries are currently at risk of facing famine as well as food riots. Dominique Burgeon, the director of emergencies at the FAO, even warned that the rich should not see food shortages arising from the pandemic as a problem for only the disenfranchised. "If food shortages begin to bite, the impacts will reverberate across the globe," he said. In fact, in agrarian and rural pockets of the world, farmers are facing huge losses since the lockdowns forced them out of their farmlands, and shortage of labour drove up costs as well as fall in demand.

In India, where the lockdown is currently seeing a huge displacement of migrant workers—who make up 37 percent of the country's population, and depend on daily wages for survival—food shortages are predicted to cause violence and unrest. "This is something new and very difficult to predict," Abdolreza Abbasian, a senior economist at FAO, said. "It is that uncertainty that right now is the biggest danger."

And it's at an uncertain time like this when the concept of grow-your-own-food is increasingly gaining traction. Jhangiani, who has been growing her own food in the form of community farms, is one of the many advocates of self-sufficiency. In fact, the pandemic has barely made much difference to the way she lives. "My own process started with processing our own waste, and from that we started growing our own food. In urban spaces, there is so much potential to have these

farms on literally every street or garden out there," she says. "And you don't even need acres and acres of land for this. I'm currently growing chikoo and mulberries in containers! You don't need a lot of space, you just need the right technique." Kitchen gardens, which are perfect for the ridiculously tiny apartments that dot most big cities, are seeing a boost as well.

At the moment, the internet is full of DIY kits to help people grow their own pantry literally anywhere. "Look around you and find the spaces that could be filled with food: lawns, verges, community gardens, the end of the cul-de-sac; and if you live in an apartment, a shared communal area—they all work," writes Palisa Anderson, an Australian restaurateur and farmer. Adds *Los Angeles Times* writer Jeanette Marantos, "Food banks are already seeing double the demand. Planting food now can help you and others get through the uncertain days ahead."

The conversation around self-sufficiency in terms of growing your own food has been around for a while, but it appears that the coronavirus lockdowns have pushed many people to do so as an emergency measure. "More people are thinking about where their food comes from, how easily it can be disrupted, and how to reduce disruptions," landscape architect Kotchakorn Voraakhom, who designed Asia's largest urban rooftop farm in Bangkok, told Thomson Reuters Foundation. "People, planners and governments should all be rethinking how land is used in cities. Urban farming can improve food security and nutrition, reduce climate change impacts, and lower stress."

The trend is also interesting considering a UN prediction that two-thirds of the world's population will be living in cities by 2050. In many countries, self-sustenance practices such as permaculture, hydroponic farming or urban farming are an exercise to reap many benefits, from choosing chemical-free food, to bringing farm-to-table concepts in commercial settings, to maintaining mental health and creating an aesthetically pleasing terrace/garden. But in countries such as Singapore, where there are no local sources for food and therefore ends up importing a large chunk of their edibles, self-sustainable farming trends such as vertical and rooftop farms, hydroponic farming, or farm fishing, have become a way forward for economies facing food shortage.

In fact, some experts feel that the pandemic could actually set off a few trends, probably for good. "Now more than ever, it's important to focus on a hyperlocal food system. Growing our own food is the best way to guarantee access to produce throughout the year," Anusha Murthy of Edible Issues, a platform that fosters a dialogue around food systems, tells VICE. "Urban gardens can be a great solution for those of us who can afford it and access it. A community-driven approach to growing food would be a smart solution as well. For us to reach towards self-sufficiency in food, knowing at least where our food comes from is a crucial first step."

Anusha Murthy (right) runs Edible Issues with co-founder Elizabeth Yorke

Jhangiani adds that while there will always be some reliance on stores for urban dwellers for items such as grains or oil, self-sufficiency can also extend to other everyday things—like making your own detergent (with orange and lemon peels), or utensil-cleaning solution (featuring water, soap nut water and lemon water) or even toothpaste (includes baking soda and coconut oil). "Self-sufficiency should extend to other aspects of living as well," says the urban farmer.

It's also interesting to see how the pandemic is radically driving conversations on self-sufficiency as opposed to several years of activism by climate crisis activists. Perhaps it's got to do with our collective vulnerabilities, which is pushing us to seek measures that would save us from a whole lot of anticipatory anxiety about the uncertain future. In the US, Google searches for "home farming" jumped by 50 percent last month, along with (and curiously so) a 75 percent jump in searches for "how to raise chickens". "Food security and sustainability are a very hot topic right now," Phyllis Davis, the president of Portable Farms Aquaponics Systems in the US, told *The New York Times*.

In India, Murthy observes that the pandemic has forced urban dwellers to look at their local food systems, and understand them better. "Resources to cook have become limited and people are going back to traditional recipes and learning to cook with ingredients they normally wouldn't use," she says. "There's another section of people creating and innovating on dishes with what they have." This could perhaps explain a whole lot of baking and cooking on social media, while Murthy also adds that the pandemic is pushing more men into the kitchens.

But the pandemic could actually not be so bad for the small and marginal farmers, who are still the biggest providers of food to India's 1.3 billion population. In fact, the pandemic and its impact would probably spare them, and the shift to local foods could potentially even help some of them. "'Farm to table' is tradition in India, not hipster fad," journalist and author Samrat writes in his column Indian digital website, *Firstpost*. "It may also help build resilience in societies and economies to the vicissitudes of globalisation, of which the present global pandemic is an example."

In the end, sure the world is in a deep mess, and yes, we have yet to see the final fallouts, but perhaps it's worthwhile to remember that every crisis has a lesson. And this one is in the kitchen.

*VICE is committed to ongoing coverage of the global climate crisis. Read all of our Earth Day 2020 coverage **here**, and more of our climate change coverage **here**.*

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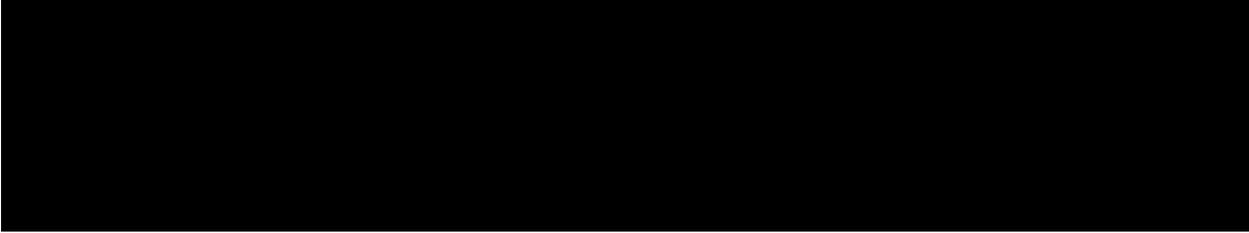
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How to Stay Sustainable During Home Quarantine

While we're relying on prepackaged food and gadgets more than ever, limiting waste and conserving energy is still possible while stuck indoors.

by Therese Reyes
22 April 2020, 11:40am

Photos from Unsplash and Pixabay

This article originally appeared on VICE ASIA.

With anxieties running high because of coronavirus fears, people are now changing their daily habits. Even some of the most environmentally woke people can't resist the safety of disposable face masks and the convenience of everyday food deliveries.

But experts warn that this mentality could end up harming us more, in the long run.

Break Free From Plastic Philippines Project Coordinator Rei Panaligan told VICE that instead of going back to old habits, lockdowns brought by the pandemic should instead be used as an opportunity to become self-aware and reflect about how we treat our surroundings.

"We can use this quarantine period to really evaluate our lifestyle," Panaligan said. "We can look into how we could minimise our own carbon footprint or how we can, you know, contribute back to our surrounding community."

While public health should always come first, he said that there are various ways we can minimise our waste, while keeping ourselves and our families safe. Below, are some tips on how to stay sustainable while on home quarantine.

Prepare a meal plan before buying groceries

Photo by energepic.com from Pexels

Meal plans will prevent you from buying unnecessary products and ensure that you have everything you need. Apart from the financial benefits, this will also help you avoid frequent trips to the market.

Bring your own reusable tote bags and containers

Photo by Sylvie Tittel on Unsplash

BYOB (Bring Your Own Bag) still applies even during the pandemic. These are safer than plastic bags from markets because you know where they came from, as opposed to containers with an unknown source.

While the United States' Centers for Disease Control (CDC) said that there is a low risk of contracting the coronavirus from food and packaging, you can still disinfect reusable bags as a precautionary measure by washing them and drying them under the sun.

Buy fresh and local produce

Photo by Theme Inn on Unsplash

Locally-produced food from public markets usually use less packaging because they are not wrapped individually, unlike some fruits and vegetables in supermarkets. Locally-produced foods have a lower carbon footprint because they are not transported from long distances and buying them supports farmers and fisherfolk during this critical period. They're also much healthier than canned and frozen goods.

Cook the right amount of food for your family

Photo by Ella Olsson on Pexels

Only prepare food your family can finish to avoid waste. There are also various ways to make the most out of leftovers, like reusing trimmings and broth for the next meal, storing leftovers in refrigerators, serving leftovers to pets, and composting waste for home plants.

Say no to napkins and plastic utensils

Photo by Jacoby Clarke from Pexels

When ordering take out, tell the restaurant to leave out disposable utensils and napkins and use what you have at home instead.

Let go of TV and computers

Photo by Anete Lūsiņa on Unsplash

Homes are consuming electricity more now that people are staying indoors. While using your computer for eight hours because of work is unavoidable, taking a break from electronics during your downtime can help conserve energy. Instead of watching TV or playing video games during the weekend, pick up a book, exercise, or try a new hobby instead. These activities are also good for mental health and can relieve anxiety better than screens can.

Set a timer for your air conditioner

Photo by Arif Wachyudin on Pixabay

Another way to conserve energy at home is by limiting the use of air conditioners. Instead of leaving it on the entire night, set a timer so that it will turn off while you're asleep. Some units can also switch to fan mode once its set temperature is equal or lower than the room's temperature.

Start gardening

Photo by Markus Spiske on Pixabay

One hobby worth trying is gardening, which experts say is a good stress reliever. Planting your own produce will allow you to reuse empty containers as pots and waste as compost. To start, grab seeds from fruits and vegetables at home.

Use cloth masks

Photo by Denny Hell on Pixabay

If you're not a Patient Under Investigation (PUI) or Person Under Monitoring (PUM), you can use a reusable cloth mask when going outside. This is a more sustainable option and will save disposable masks for frontliners who need them more.

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China May Have Beaten Coronavirus, But Now It Could Be Facing a Food Crisis

"China's agricultural industry has collapsed."

by David Gilbert
03 April 2020, 6:15am

This article originally appeared on VICE US.

China has claimed victory over the coronavirus outbreak inside its borders, but now the country faces another crisis: food shortages.

Rumors of a food shortage have swirled on social media for weeks, in the wake of the coronavirus lockdown that stopped tens of millions of people from going to work, and a leaked government document made public on Thursday shows that government officials have also been planning for a shortfall in food supplies.

The document, dated March 28, was drafted following a meeting of a party committee in Linxia Prefecture, a region of 2 million people in central China. The meeting was called to make special arrangements for food security.

"The State Party Committee and the state governments and counties and cities must do everything possible to transfer and store all kinds of living materials such as grain, beef, mutton, oil and salt through various channels," the document said, according to a report from Radio Free Asia.

The document also calls for the "mobilization of the masses to consciously store grain and ensure that each household reserves between 3 and 6 months of grain for emergencies."

There is also evidence that citizens in certain parts of the country are panic buying in response to rumors around a food shortage.

As the rumors gained traction on social media, the government denied that the country is facing any crisis.

"Consumers have no need to worry about the shortage of food supplies and the sharp rise in prices. They don't have to concentrate on buying bulk food at home," Wang Bin, deputy director of the Department of Consumer Promotion of the Ministry of Commerce, said Thursday.

READ: Here's how China Is rewriting the history of the coronavirus pandemic to make itself the hero

Beijing has also mobilized the state-run media to try to convince the world that China is not facing a food crisis.

Wang's comments are in stark contrast to those from the Ministry of Commerce in February, when a spokesperson admitted that China's agriculture and food industries would be "heavily impacted" if the coronavirus crisis persisted.

Six weeks later, parts of the country are still in lockdown and the government is even locking down new areas in an attempt to prevent a second wave of infections.

Wang's claim is based on the fact that China's stocks of wheat, corn and rice in 2019 totaled more than 280 million tons, while yearly consumption on average is more than 200 million tons.

But the three-month-long coronavirus lockdown saw China's economy grind to a halt, and has had a huge impact on the country's food production capabilities. Data gathered by the Qufu Normal University in February found that 60% of village officials in 1,636 counties were "pessimistic" or "very pessimistic" about the planting season.

READ: Wuhan's crematoriums are filling thousands of urns with coronavirus remains each day

Farmers are struggling to find feed for their livestock and fertilizer is now in short supply. Hubei province, the epicenter of the outbreak, is also the country's main producer of fertilizer, and factories have struggled to reopen. One estimate puts the shortfall in fertilizer production at 40%.

Another major part of the problem for Chinese farmers is that they rely heavily on domestic migrant workers. Many workers returned home during the Lunar New Year festival at the end of January, but with public transport coming to a halt and tens of millions of people in lockdown, farmers have struggled to find enough laborers to cultivate their crops.

"China's agricultural industry has collapsed without the free flow of labour and raw materials," said Ma Wenfeng, an analyst at CnAgri, a consultancy in Beijing, told the Financial Times last month.

Cover: A woman carrying a suitcase and vegetables enters the city of Wuhan which is still under lockdown due to the coronavirus outbreak but have started allowing some residents to return in central China's Hubei province on Thursday, April 2, 2020. (AP Photo/Ng Han Guan)

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